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The Dazzling World of Nonfiction

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There's more to nonfiction than just dead presidents and whales.

Open-minded about books and willing to read almost anything, one of my 6th grade students, Ashley, typically read four or five books each week. By early spring, she had read more than 100 books that school year. However, when I looked in her reader's notebook during a reading conference, it was clear to me that Ashley avoided reading nonfiction books. She had not read much self-selected nonfiction all year. Recognizing this deficit as an opportunity for Ashley to stretch herself as a reader, I suggested that we look for a few nonfiction books that she might like to read.

"I hate nonfiction, Mrs. Miller. It's so boring. It's all about dead presidents and whales," she said.

Trying not to laugh, I asked, "Why do you say that, Ashley?"

"The only time you need a nonfiction book is when you're researching a report. I don't like to read those books for fun," she admitted.

When several students at Ashley's table expressed similar disinterest in reading nonfiction, it surprised me. My experiences raising daughters led me to believe that most children thoroughly enjoyed nonfiction. During the "why?" years of early childhood, preschool and primary-age children beg to read such science-related books as Steve Jenkins' *Actual Size* (HMH Books for Young Readers, 2011), which shows readers how their size compares with that of a variety of animals, and Gail Gibbons's *The Moon Book* (Holiday House, 1998). They're also fascinated by David Adler's Picture Book Biography series, which introduces readers to the lives of such people as Thomas Edison, Rosa Parks, Simón Bolívar, and Patrick Henry.

When I mentioned these titles to Ashley and her classmates, they remembered reading and enjoying similar titles when they were younger, but they didn't like to read about science or history anymore. What changed as my students grew older?

Why the Disinterest?

In many primary and elementary school classrooms, students spend the entire day with one teacher, who provides instruction in every subject. Teachers typically use several nonfiction trade books throughout the school day. At this age, children read, share, and discuss nonfiction texts as a natural part of learning.

As students progress through school, however, courses become more departmentalized, and students' ability to read and extract information from nonfiction becomes increasingly important to their academic success (Duke, 2004). Unfortunately, many students fail to acquire strong nonfiction reading skills even as they're expected to become better readers of nonfiction.

Pressured to teach overstuffed content in shorter class periods, content-area teachers may depend more on textbooks to deliver information and find fewer opportunities for students to read trade nonfiction. Language arts teachers—who provide a substantial proportion of students' reading material at school—focus on their own content demands and read less nonfiction with students, too. In the past, we expected students to read nonfiction when we assigned research reports—Ashley's dead presidents and whales. But increasingly, we encourage students to conduct research online, which bypasses the reading of nonfiction trade books altogether.

Without much exposure to, access to, or experience with reading nonfiction in their classes, it's not surprising that older students read fewer nonfiction books. As with any type of text, we must look for meaningful ways to incorporate nonfiction texts into our daily instruction if we want students to read more of it. In our information age, students must become strong readers and evaluators of nonfiction texts, both online and offline (Moss, 2003).

A Treasure Trove of Resources

The quality and diversity of children's nonfiction have improved dramatically over the years. Nonfiction books include more text features like color photographs, illustrations, glossaries, and captions, which support and engage young readers. Students can find nonfiction books about many topics that interest them—such as athletes, artists, musicians, arts and crafts, cars, fashion, and animals. Moving away from mass-produced library sets churned out by commissioned writers, children's publishers regularly offer well-written and researched nonfiction from outstanding nonfiction authors who understand their audience and know how to engage children, such as Candace Fleming, Sy Montgomery, Nic Bishop, Jim Murphy, and Russell Freedman.

How to Get Kids Hooked on Nonfiction

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, there's heightened emphasis on reading nonfiction throughout the school day. Teachers need effective, easy-to-implement ways to increase students' nonfiction reading skills, their access to good nonfiction books, and their motivation for reading them. Consider doing the following.

Book Talk More Nonfiction

Add nonfiction books and magazines to your daily book commercials, those short testimonials that promote books to other readers. This introduces students to books they might read and increases their awareness of the kinds of books available. Make an effort to suggest more nonfiction books to your students, and invite your students to share the nonfiction books they read. As literacy specialist Linda Gambrell noted, "Children read what we bless."

Personally recommending nonfiction books communicates to students that we value nonfiction and find it interesting to read. When recommending books, consider that some students may actually prefer nonfiction to fiction. Endorsing nonfiction alongside fiction, poetry, graphic novels, and other texts reinforces that all readers' tastes matter in your classroom.

Read Nonfiction Texts Aloud

Regularly reading nonfiction picture books, poetry, articles, and excerpts aloud to students increases their background knowledge and provides engaging opportunities to explore content. You can also take advantage of websites like [Wonderopolis](#) and read aloud the "wonder of the day"—which raises and answers such intriguing questions as, What gives you the giggles? Where do armadillos live? and How do metal detectors work?

Ask your school librarian for nonfiction materials that align with upcoming units of study and work with grade-level or department colleagues to locate nonfiction materials that support your course content. Consider nonfiction series that lead your students to more books they can read independently, such as Houghton Mifflin's *Scientists in the Field* series, which introduces students to careers in science (for example, what a tarantula scientist does, what an elephant scientist does) as well as to a wide range of scientific investigations (such as investigating what happens to trash or studying spider silk DNA).

Look for easy ways to weave more nonfiction reading into your daily routine. My students enjoy fact and trivia books like Steve Murrie's *Every Day on Earth: Fun Facts That Happen Every 24 Hours* (Scholastic, 2011). (Did you know, for example, that every 24 hours 70,000 kittens and puppies are born?) Or Anna Claybourne's *100 Most Awesome Things on the Planet* (Scholastic, 2011), which, the author notes, is students' "ultimate guide" to, among other things, exploding volcanoes, huge earthquakes, giant waves, and miniscule machines. It's easy to read a few of these facts each day while students are waiting in line or during class transitions. When choosing longer read-alouds, I alternate fiction and poetry selections with nonfiction books like Philip Hoose's *Moonbird* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2012),

which recounts the story of a small Eastern shorebird who makes an 18,000-mile round-trip migration every year.

Use Nonfiction as Mentor Texts

Although nonfiction texts provide students with authentic models for organizing and presenting information, well-written nonfiction texts like Kathleen Krull's *Big Wig: A Little History of Hair* (Arthur A. Levine Books, 2011) and Joyce Sidman's *Ubiquitous: Celebrating Nature's Survivors* (Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 2010) also provide rich examples of descriptive writing, figurative language, and imagery—concepts historically taught using fiction. Examining nonfiction texts as writing models reveals authors' different approaches to topics and diverse writing styles (Capriello, Zarnowski, & Aronson, 2013).

For example, when students read the following lines from Douglas Florian's poem "Worker Bee" (Beach Lane Books, 2012)—"Sister, sister, sister, sister/Not one brother, not one mister"—they can examine the author's use of rhythmic elements and repetition as well as his inclusion of scientific information about bees (the fact that all worker bees are female).

When designing units of study or lesson plans, include nonfiction texts. This exposure will improve students' expository writing and increase their awareness of the different types of nonfiction texts available.

Pair Nonfiction Texts with Texts on Related Topics

Offering nonfiction that supplements fiction, poetry, or other nonfiction works encourages students to explore real-world connections, exposes them to other texts they might read, and enhances their understanding of historical and technical references they encounter in their reading.

Pair primary sources like Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech with Kadir Nelson's stunning picture book, *I Have a Dream* (Schwartz & Wade, 2012). Read poems from Douglas Florian's *UnBEElievable: Honey Bee Poems and Paintings* (Beach Lane Books, 2012) alongside Loree Griffin Burns's *Hive Detectives: Chronicle of a Honey Bee Catastrophe* (HMH Books for Young Readers, 2010). You can use excerpts of longer texts for close-reading lessons, then offer students the complete book afterward for independent reading or additional research.

Provide Access, Time, and Supports

Collect nonfiction texts that relate to curriculum content and invite students to skim and scan these materials every day as warm-up or introductory activities in science and social studies classes. Encourage students to locate text features like maps, charts, photographs, and glossaries. Ask students to share interesting facts and visuals they discover during these daily previews. These discussions help students make personal connections to what they read, increase reading motivation, and construct deeper understanding of content (Asselin, 2004).

Moss and Hendershot (2002) observed that when students have more access and exposure to engaging nonfiction texts, their motivation and interest in reading nonfiction improves. I often notice students returning to the same book day after day during these short scanning sessions, reading entire nonfiction books they might not have self-selected.

When my students claim they dislike reading nonfiction, I assume they lack positive reading experiences with this genre. They may also lack certain skills. In addition to needing lots of practice reading nonfiction, students also need instruction in the "predictable characteristics" of nonfiction texts (Miller, 2002), such as text structures like cause and effect.

Reading the World

When teachers offer more nonfiction texts to students and use nonfiction in meaningful ways to enhance instruction, students will become better nonfiction readers and find more value in it. They'll build background knowledge, increase their confidence, and discover authors and topics that feed further reading. When our students read more, the world is open to them as an endless source of learning and inspiration.

How to Locate Great Nonfiction

If you're looking for high-quality nonfiction texts to use with your students, here are several good places to start.

Go for the Noteworthy

The following organizations, which have a long history of book award expertise, honor outstanding nonfiction books:

- [The Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal](#) is awarded annually to the most distinguished contribution to nonfiction books for children from birth to age 14. Medal winners and honors books have included narrative nonfiction and biographies and range from picture books to young adult titles.

- [The YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction](#) honors the best nonfiction books for readers ages 12–18. A shortlist of up to five titles is announced in December. The winning title is announced in January at the Youth Media Awards ceremony at the American Library Association.
- [The NCTE Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children](#) is awarded annually to recognize and award excellence in nonfiction writing for children. The award is named after Comenius' book *Orbis Pictus*, published in 1658, which is thought to be the first book designed specifically for children.
- [Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People](#) is a list from the National Council for Social Studies compiled in collaboration with the Children's Book Council. Books selected for this bibliography are written primarily for children in grades K–8 and provide fresh perspectives on a wide range of topics in social studies.
- [Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K–12](#) is a joint collaboration between the Children's Book Council and the National Science Teachers Association. The selection committee compiles annual lists in various areas of the sciences (biology, engineering, and so on).
- [The AAAS/Subaru SB&F Prizes for Excellence in Science Books](#) recognizes "outstanding science writing and illustration for children and young adults." The prize is administered annually by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Review the Reviews

Reviewing sources are one of the key instruments librarians use to keep up-to-date with the latest publications in the field. Check with your librarian to see which of these journals your school receives, and ask to be placed on any circulation of them:

- [School Library Journal](#)
- [Booklist](#)
- [The Horn Book Magazine](#)
- [VOYA \(Voice of Youth Advocates\)](#)
- [Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books](#)

Check out Blogs and Websites

Online sources also provide great reviews of new informational and narrative nonfiction texts. Here are a few sources to start off with:

- [Reading Rants: Out of the Ordinary Teen Booklists](#)
- [Nonfiction Booktalker](#). A blog written by Kathleen Baxter on the *School Library Journal* website.
- [The Nonfiction Detectives](#). A blog written by librarians Louise Capizzo and Cathy Potter.
- [Nonfiction Monday](#). Bloggers submit reviews of nonfiction books.

Find Books by Theme

A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books (Libraries Unlimited, 2010) offers thematic listings of picture books that help teachers plan new units of instruction.

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